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ABSTRACT

A program of written composition based on reading comprehension can help students gain greater in-depth understanding of reading materials. Once the reading comprehension skill has been clearly defined for the class, the writing activity can provide clarification by allowing for analysis of the definition through written manipulation of language. In preparing the lesson, teachers should consider the selection of skills, the choice of topic, and strategies for grouping students. The list of reading comprehension skills could come from any number of sources, and should be listed in order of priority. Writing topics should be of high interest to students to motivate them. There are three key words for student grouping--appropriateness, flexibility, and diversity. The comprehension/writing lesson should begin with the presentation of a directed reading lesson, while the skill to be presented should be clearly defined using vocabulary appropriate to the students. In planning the writing lesson, teachers should include the lesson objective, warm-up exercises, clarification of the activity objective, statement of the assignment, writing, editing, follow-up, and display of the final product. (Examples of composition activities related to the comprehension skills of paraphrasing, summarizing, and fact/opinion are included.) (HOD)

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Writing Composition Activities to Enhance Reading Comprehension

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Writing Composition Activities to

Enhance Reading Comprehension

Teachers are often perplexed by the inability of their students to deal with comprehension skills comparable to their grade levels. A program of written composition based on reading comprehension can help students gain greater in-depth understanding of reading materials.

Much research effort has been undertaken to explore the links between written instruction and reading comprehension. (Applebee, 1977; Brooks, 1977; Grobe & Grobe, 1977; Klein, 1980; Lunsford, 1978; Shanahan, 1980; M.J. Wilson, 1981). The results of these studies indicate that there is indeed a link and that writing composition and reading comprehension mutually affect one another.

Purpose

The purpose of this article is to describe a method of reinforcing specific reading comprehension skills through the use of writing composition activities. By using this method both reading and writing skills may be strengthened.

The method will be described in an extended outline proceeding from the initiating reading lesson through the composition activity to the follow-up. Suggestions given in pre-planning the lesson will include skill selection, choice of topic, and grouping strategies. Specific examples of composition activities related to the comprehension skills of paraphrasing, summarizing, and fact/opinion will be listed.

The composition lesson is not to be seen as an end in itself but rather a means to an end. That is, the writing activity can

play a most important part in the comprehension skill development lesson. Once the skill has been clearly defined for the class, the writing activity can be utilized to provide clarification by allowing for analysis of the components of the definition through written manipulation of language.

Pre-lesson Considerations

It is assumed that the students have some basic writing skills, such as letter formation, spelling vocabulary, and sentence construction. They are also ready to deal with the comprehension skills compatible with their reading levels.

In preparing the lesson consider the selection of skills, the choice of topic, and grouping strategies.

Selection of skills

The list of reading comprehension skills to be developed could come from any number of sources. Texts by Bond and Tinker, 1973; Guszak, 1978; Harris and Sipay, 1980; Pearson and Johnson, 1978; Spache and Spache, 1973; Wilson, 1981, all provide helpful possibilities. Most of the basal reading series available on today's market contain lists of comprehension skills. In order to maintain consistency and avoid inadvertantly omitting a skill use a single selected source for the entire year.

Another aspect of skill selection is that of prioritizing what may be a lengthy list. The use of test scores may be most appropriate to help in that decision. The comprehension skill demonstrated by the test results to be weakest may be a place to start. Survey or achievement tests that are often given will not sufficiently define a student's specific abilities. More detailed scores may be obtained from teacher-made criterion referenced tests

or tests of this type that may be available from basal publishers. The scores from these tests will also be mentioned later as helpful in grouping decisions.

Selection of composition topic

The actual topic of the composition could be drawn from any number of places. Ideas may be seasonal. They may be related to the story that was used in the reading lesson which would further reinforce the student's involvement with its content. Shared or individual experiences are also appropriate sources for topics. Published sources of ideas may be found in Cramer's Children's Writing and Language Growth or Frank's If You're Trying to Teach Kids How to Write, You've Gotta Have This Book. Whatever topic is selected should be of high interest to the student so as to be motivational. A personally interesting topic seems to be easier to write about.

Grouping students

There are three key words for grouping: appropriateness, flexibility, and diversity. The teacher applies the principles of good judgment in choosing what form of grouping to use for a written assignment.

There are composition assignments that are most appropriately accomplished as individual efforts. Some work, on the other hand, may be more effective when given to a small group. The determining factor here may be either the difficulty of the task, or the creative interaction resulting when more than one mind is used to develop a single product.

Flexible grouping may mean pairs, triads, or small groups. The class may determine for itself the group size for some assignments. A potpourri of group sizes may occur but some very good written

products may also result.

Groups may be assigned using creative criteria such as signs of the zodiac, favorite colors, or what students had for breakfast.

Groups may need to be assigned according to the results of the criterion-referenced test scores. This is most appropriate when a particular skill is in need of development by several students.

The teacher can use the test scores to group students by their strengths thus avoiding the negative aspects of using weaknesses. An adventurous possibility focusing on such strengths is to diversify strengths within each group. This way the students can draw from one another the best each has to offer. A group assigned in this manner may have a great speller, a great "handwriter", and a great idea person.

Trying many combinations of grouping may be most rewarding and the fun-aspects of group work being highly motivational should never be overlooked.

Once students become experienced with the expectations of the composition activity, they may be able to dictate their own grouping arrangements using some very sound reasoning including the content of the assignment, the experience required, or decisions concerning interpersonal relations.

By all means if a grouping arrangement is not working make an adjustment. There is no reason a good writing experience should be ruined by a matter of logistics.

Methodology

The reading comprehension-writing composition lesson is outlined as follows:

I. The Reading Lesson

Begin with the presentation of a directed reading lesson as planned.

Since a comprehension skill emphasis is routinely included within such a lesson there is no need to be concerned with selection of the skill unless it does not compliment the strengths and/or needs of the class. In cases where the skill does not match, refer to the list dictated by class scores on the test given earlier.

II. The Definition

Clearly define the skill to be presented using vocabulary appropriate to the students.

Clarify the definition through the use of examples. These examples should come from the reading selection used in the lesson, if possible; otherwise, any literary source applicable to the definition may be used as could selections from kits, or specific skill workbooks.

III. The Writing Activity

In planning the writing lesson use an outline such as:

A. Lesson objective

B. Warm-up

   1. Whole class motivational activity

   2. Whole class written response

C. Clarification of the activity objective

D. Statement of the assignment

E. Writing

F. Editing

G. Follow-up

H. Display of the final product

Here are some specific examples of composition activities

related to the comprehension skills of paraphrasing, summarizing, and fact/opinion:

Skill: Paraphrasing

Definition: Paraphrasing is a process where the original words of the author are transformed into the words of the reader. The meaning of the passage is faithfully maintained through the length may be slightly altered.

Activities:

1. Have several sets of directions for assembling things available to the class. Such directions can come from toys, fixtures of some sort, or small kits for models. Have the students rewrite the directions, trying to improve on the manner used by the manufacturer.
2. Using their favorite jokes, either taken from memory or classroom jokebooks, ask the students to paraphrase the jokes being careful to maintain the same story line, only in their own or different words. Thus, "What is the difference between an elephant and a grape?" becomes "What is the contrast between a pachyderm and a reconstituted raisin?"
3. Using the want ads in the newspaper ask the students to select a single ad for paraphrasing. Have the students add the words that have probably been left out for the sake of brevity. Be careful not to change the intent or meaning of the ad.

Skill: Summarizing

Definition: In summarizing a passage students are asked to shorten its length while keeping the essence of the content.

Activities:

1. Discuss with the class the content of a well-known story, such as "Little Red Riding Hood" or "Cinderella". List the class' major ideas on the chalkboard in a word or phrase lengths. Challenge the students to write these ideas into a summary paragraph by building each short idea into a full sentence.
2. Divide the class according to the television programs they had watched the evening before. Ask the students to summarize the content of the program. When they are finished, have them compare their summaries to those in the local newspapers or TV Guide.
3. For a week have each student make a collection of news articles, stories, cartoons, editorials, commentaries, advertisements and other information on a topic of personal interest. Have each student write a summary of the major ideas shared by the collected items.

Skill: Fact/opinion

Definition: A fact is a bit of information that may be proven. An opinion though it may be based on fact is a statement of an individual's thinking about that item.

Activities:

1. Have the students imagine that they have just encountered the most fascinating stranger. Ask them to write several questions they might use to discuss this individual's opinion of subjects of interest to the students.
2. Give the class a list of general terms such as bank, truck, run. Have the students write an opinion statement

and then a fact statement related to each term.

3. With the class brainstorm a list of things about which the students feel strongly. Ask the students to select one item and write their opinion about it. Have them anticipate what the opposition might say against them. Suggest they support their opinion with facts where possible.

IV. The Follow-up

Include a follow-up activity to obtain a logical closure to the reading lesson using this method. Refocus on the original objective clearly relating the writing activity to that beginning.

Hold a whole class or small group discussion where the components of the definition are reiterated and exemplified by the students' writing, outside literary sources, and/or the initial reading selection. An interesting point that could be discussed would be the thought processes the students used to produce their compositions as guided by the original definition.

Ask students to read aloud what they have written. Have the class respond either individually to their own work, or as a group to each other's work pointing out the strengths of the examples as they relate to the given definition.

Have students demonstrate their mastery of the comprehension skill by using paper-and-pencil activities as workbook-like assignments or post-test questions. A post-test follow-up makes sense in light of the use of pre-testing to prioritize the comprehension skills and place the students in work groups or to individualize assignments.

Display the compositions perhaps on a bulletin board stating

the definition that initiated the lesson along with the writings and some pictures that help to clarify or extend the concept.

Whatever technique is selected clearly relate the final product of the writing activity to the original definition.

Summary

Reading and writing are both such language rich endeavors where meaning is the key factor that to present them as mutually reinforcing skills appears to be a sound approach.

The procedure described here has students analyzing the characteristics of a reading comprehension skill and applying those characteristics to produce an example using their own language. By manipulating these language patterns, students are required to give personal meaning to the component characteristics of the reading comprehension skill.

The method itself calls for a clear statement of a skill definition followed by student production of an example. Class strengths and needs are met by careful selection of the topic, grouping arrangements, and the assignment itself.

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